

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 18, 2010

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) yesterday sent the following letter to President Obama regarding his upcoming meetings with Russian President Dmitri Medvedev.

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June 17, 2010

The President  
The White House  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

Human rights problems in Russia need to be raised publicly by you and by your administration.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has concluded that this would be particularly important in your upcoming meetings with Russian President Dmitri Medvedev.

In conjunction with expressing concern over religious freedom in Russia, I also respectfully ask

that you urge reform of Russia's law on extremism. In addition, I urge you to take specific actions to protest the impunity accorded to Russian officials and others who commit gross human

rights violations as well as violent hate crimes against members of Russia's religious and ethnic

minorities, including Jews, Muslims, and Protestants. Pressing Moscow to accord greater respect

for human rights for all its citizens is critical if Russia is to become a more democratic, dynamic, and stable strategic partner.

USCIRF, an independent U.S. government entity created by Congress to monitor religious freedom worldwide and make policy recommendations to the Executive and Legislative branches, has reported on the Russian Federation since 1999. The Russian government has increased its use of anti-extremist legislation against religious and other groups that are not

known to use or advocate violence, including Jehovah's Witnesses. The Russian extremism law

should be amended to ensure that it no longer is used against peaceful human rights and religious

groups. Although the Russian Federation faces genuine security threats, the provisions and implementation of the extremism law risk increasing radicalism and instability in Russia.

Another key human rights issue is the impunity accorded to Russian officials, particularly Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov due to his leadership of the Chechen armed forces, his alleged killings of political opponents and local human rights activists, and his institution of strict sharia law in Chechnya in violation of international religious freedom standards. The European Court for Human Rights has issued 132 rulings on severe human rights abuses committed in Chechnya. I hope you will support USCIRF's call for the U.S. government to issue a U.S. visa ban against Kadyrov and to freeze his bank assets.

Many Russian officials also proclaim that certain religious and ethnic groups are alien to Russian

culture and society, thereby contributing to a climate of intolerance. In general, the Russian government has failed to address consistently or effectively the severe and chronic problem of violent and sometimes lethal hate crimes and anti-Semitism. Numerous acts of vandalism against

synagogues, churches, and mosques also go largely unpunished or are attributed to hooliganism.

USCIRF is concerned that the de facto favored status of the Moscow Patriarchate Russian Orthodox Church results in difficulties for minority religious communities, particularly those officially deemed non-traditional, such as the non-Moscow Patriarchate Russian Orthodox and Protestant communities. These groups face denials of registration, detention and harassment of

their members, and delays and refusals to permit construction or to grant rental permits for places of worship.

USCIRF is convinced that raising freedom of religion or belief as an important issue in U.S.-Russian bilateral relations with President Medvedev will enhance this key relationship while exemplifying American respect for universal human rights. It is only by enacting reforms of Russian laws and policies on human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, that Moscow

will become an effective partner with the United States on the common international interests in which the two nations are currently engaged.

Sincerely,  
Leonard Leo  
Chair

Attachment

CC: Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton